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Forum: Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities

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Toward Alternative Humanities and Insurgent Collectivities

Chris A Eng and Amy K King

ABSTRACT Introduction to Part II of the forum, Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities. Here, emergent scholars respond to essays by J. Kōhaulani Kauanui, Kyla Wazana Tompkins, Julie Avril Minich, and Jodi Melamed, each of whom elaborated on the alternative possibilities of dealing with the legacies of settler colonialism, new materialisms, disability, and institutionality in Part I, published in *Lateral* 5.1.

"Otherwise, who crawls into the place of the 'human' of 'humanism' at the end of the day, even in the name of diversity? We must consider 'collectivities.'"

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*.¹

What is the role of the Humanities in our contemporary moment? How can we engage in modes of scholarly practices and critical analytics anew in order to best respond to our political exigencies in ways that simultaneously attend to the forces shaping the historical present while imagining a more just future? These questions guided the early conversations for this two-part forum, which began in preparation for the 2014 American Studies Association annual conference in Los Angeles. As members of the Students' Committee, we collectively contemplated the conference theme's prompt for conjoining "the fun and the fury" in our theorizing, organizing, and teaching. In collaboration, we considered the necessity of such a call during a moment when rhetoric and actions that ostensibly champion victories in progress, rights, and freedom increasingly worked to obfuscate and rationalize sustained forms of systemic violence. Critical conversations taking place across the interdisciplinary fields of cultural studies, American studies, and critical ethnic studies interrogated the practices by which conventional terms of Humanism invoked by the university, "in the name of diversity," served as an alibi that inhibited the possibility for structural change and emancipatory futures. For us, the scholar-activist-teachers across these fields enacted and gestured toward the potential for insurgent collectives that craft alternative humanities, in dissent and in conviviality, toward demands for materializing social justice.

As a way of animating and resounding these lines of thought, we organized a roundtable wherein established scholars followed the model of the "keywords" project, pioneered by cultural studies scholars. The roundtable participants outlined some of the possibilities, limitations, and ongoing projects associated with what we observed as four emergent critical analytics: settler colonialism, new materialisms, disability, and institutionality. The roundtable session was well attended and sparked a lively dialogue between the panelists and junior scholars in the audience, which compelled us to extend the conversations further. From the start, we wanted to offer a venue to facilitate a call-and-response between established and emergent scholar-activist-teachers, the type of conversation

that would cross disciplinary boundaries, subvert entrenched mentoring practices in academia, and provide access to a wide audience beyond the traditional printed format. This journal afforded us the platform for staging such lateral encounters between and across conventional boundaries while resonating with our convictions about culture as a complex site for materialist critique that can allow us to envision otherwise.

This two-part forum thus serves as a modest point of departure for considering alternative models of collaborative thinking and strategizing in the academy, the classroom, and beyond. In [Part I](#) of the forum, [J. Kēhaulani Kauanui](#), [Kyla Wazana Tompkins](#), [Julie Avril Minich](#), and [Jodi Melamed](#) each elaborated on the alternative possibilities of dealing with the legacies of settler colonialism, new materialisms, disability, and institutionality. Their remarks prompted us to re-formulate these keywords as emergent critical analytics in order to nuance their contradictory uses and effects, as the introduction to Part I of the forum contemplates. Made clear throughout their comments was how they imagine alternatives to the humanities as practice, placing the intersectional experiences of people's lived materialities at the center of their scholarship and classrooms. In Part II of this forum, emergent scholars take up the call in Part I, and we are humbled by the warm response to our call. Here, we are excited to feature the intellectual work by the following emerging scholars in this part of the forum: Tanja Aho, Melissa Gniadek, Michelle N. Huang, Beenash Jafri, Jina B. Kim, Sami Schalk, Chad Shomura, and Leland Tabares. Writing in collaboration and with critical generosity, Kauanui, Tompkins, Minich, and Melamed then synthesize these responses and offer further thoughts. Read together, Parts I and II of the forum signal the importance of visible, ongoing discussions that expand beyond temporal, national, and disciplinary bounds.

The prompt for imagining alternative humanities and different scholarly and pedagogical models seems more urgent than ever in this political climate: as funding to education and the humanities are increasingly under attack; as the current administration sanctions xenophobia, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, ableism, militarism, and antiblackness under the consolidation of white nationalism. The election of Trump radically troubles celebrations of American exceptionalism, instead illuminating the ascendance of Far Right politics globally. These conditions ground the stakes of our work and the terms by which contributors to this forum offer their thoughts on attending to the critical potential of these analytics. Responding to Kauanui's meditation on Patrick Wolfe's theorization (seeing settler colonialism as "a structure, not an event"), Melissa Gniadek and Beenash Jafri show how considering the multiple and intersecting temporalities of colonial violence has shaped their roles as scholar-activists. Gniadek approaches settler colonialism via questions of time—asking "When is settler colonialism?"—which reveals how narratives of national belonging tend to operate, as "narrative confrontations" that facilitate violence throughout and across time. Jafri articulates how a critical race feminist/queer lens makes possible thinking that sees the repetitions of racialized, gendered, sexualized colonial violence. Both Gniadek and Jafri refocus the work of scholars so they are not continuously defining/defending their terminology ("settler colonialism"), but rather taking on the roles of scholar-activists, confronting intersecting violence directly while centering Indigenous peoples in this work. Chad Shomura and Michelle N. Huang likewise further contemplate the "limits and promise of new materialist philosophy" that Tompkins delineated. Both essays further nuance what Tompkins evinced as the lack of engagement with questions of race, difference, and the biopolitical as schools of new materialist thought turned toward the ontological, the nonhuman, and the posthuman. Attending to this dynamic, Shomura mediates upon the promise and possibilities that new materialisms affords in its attentiveness to the material. Meanwhile, Huang reassesses the methodological implications of new

materialisms by grappling with renewed attention to form in literary studies to articulate the varying processes by which racial difference becomes elided, rematerialized, and remade. In so doing, both Shomura and Huang identify multiple counter-currents within this growing field to apprehend the ways in which alternative ontologies may open up new understandings of the biopolitical and other avenues for critique.

Scholar-activist-teachers Jina B. Kim and Sami Schalk take up Minich's call to approach disability as methodology, one that decenters the intertwined dominant positions of whiteness and ability (Kim) and focuses on social structures, which Schalk visually signals with the punctuation of the term *(dis)ability*. In so doing, Kim and Schalk elaborate upon a crip-of-color lens, through which they see the possibilities to both question structures that inherently devalue humans and to take action to work toward justice. Both Kim and Schalk call for a shift in thinking that directly affects action. Schalk creates classroom experiences that help students to critique intersecting social structures in their everyday encounters, and Kim recognizes that these structures extend to educational institutions themselves. Kim's final call is to identify and act against the inequalities and harm of academic labor, urging readers to take seriously a "politics of refusal" that might help academics of color survive through alternative collectivities. Continuing to interrogate institutions, Tanja Aho and Leland Tabares take up Melamed's task in problematizing certain common strands of theorizing institutionality while imagining what else might be possible. Aho pointedly argues that studies of institutionality all too often substantiate what she calls "neoliberalocentrism," which readily posits neoliberalism as *the* singular paradigm for narrating a teleological development of history. Instead, she echoes Kim and Schalk to articulate "crip-of-color materialism" as an analytic that thickens understandings about global structures of inequity and fissures within them. Alongside Aho, Tabares invites us to question the role of what he calls "para-institutions," such as corporations, in shaping and influencing the logics and investments within the university. As a counterpoint to these processes, he ponders the possibilities of seizing upon the elements of proceduralism in mobilizing forms of collectivity that can span across institutional contexts outside the academy.

By drawing our attention to the structures within which we produce our scholarship, Parts I and II of this forum take up the task of reconsidering the present of the "Humanities" and what it means to be "human." As our contributors illustrate, when we engage in dialogues across disciplines, across spaces, and across temporalities, we speak to and against the institutionalized ideas of diversity, relevance, value, outcomes, and civility. Together, we might read these conversations and collaborations to envision and enact modes of insurgent collectivities that work within and beyond the academy—within and beyond the radical uncertainties of our here and now.

Notes

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 23. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



Chris A Eng

Chris Eng is Assistant Professor of English and the Emerson Faculty Fellow at Syracuse University. He received his PhD in English from The Graduate Center, CUNY. He is currently working on his book manuscript entitled *Dislocating Camps: On Queer Aesthetics, State Power & Asian/Americanist Critique*; its dissertation form won the CLAGS 2016 Paul Monette-Roger

Horwitz Dissertation Prize. His writings have appeared in *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *Lateral*, and *Women & Performance*. Chris previously served on the MLA Delegate Assembly and currently chairs the Queer Studies Section of the Association for Asian American Studies. In 2016–2017, he was a Post-Doctoral Research Associate in Asian American Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

 [Bio](#)



Amy K King

Amy K. King is a Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellow at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Her current book project places depictions of women at the center of her inquiry to interrogate their involvement in empires throughout the "New World." King argues that a substantial number of recent written and visual texts employ depictions of violence between women to illuminate grotesquely violent cultural norms enacted on and continuing beyond plantation settings. Portions of this work appear in the edited collection *Reading/Speaking/Writing the Mother Text: Essays on Caribbean Women's Writing* (Demeter Press 2015). King also has two recent essays in *Mississippi Quarterly* and *south: a scholarly journal* that reconsider comparative methodologies for hemispheric American studies.



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